

# THE ROLE OF MILITARY HISTORY IN THE EDUCATION OF FUTURE OFFICERS

by Michael Evans, Land Warfare Studies Centre

Prepared for the 1997 Chief of Army Exercise -  
*Preparing Future Leaders: Officer Education and Training for 21st Century*

Many of you will recognise that dramatisation of General Douglas MacArthur's famous 'Duty, Honour Country' speech delivered at West Point on 12 May 1962 to an audience of officer cadets soon to become junior leaders in the Vietnam War. MacArthur belonged to a generation which produced a group of gifted American, European and British Commonwealth military officers - all of whom began their military careers at the end of the nineteenth century in the era of the cavalry and ended their active service in the mid-twentieth century in the nuclear age.

What might be styled as the 'MacArthur generation' presided over a revolution in warfare, but many of its members never forgot that military history was the laboratory of the professional soldier. Through knowledge of history, many of them learned that while military leadership is unique, countless numbers before them had endured on the lonely pinnacle of command. Through history, they recognised that modern warfare while changing all the time was, in its application, an extrapolation of the methods from past warfare. And, because of military history, many of the MacArthur generation knew the worth of their honourable profession - with its special calling, its ethic of service, and its devotion to duty.

Although it is sometimes fashionable to suggest that, in order to prosper, today's military must become a New Age organisation reflecting contemporary social trends, I want to argue today that the absolutist values outlined by General MacArthur are universal ones; that they have been fundamental to the Western concept of military professionalism in the past and will continue to be so in the future. I suggest that such values can only have true meaning if they are underpinned by a modern appreciation of military history as the corporate knowledge of the profession of arms. A broad understanding of the history of war retains a powerful intellectual relevance in the information age and will be integral to the development of future leaders in Western armies in the next century. But military educators need to use the discipline of history in a modern and imaginative way. This can only be done if a military establishment adopts an approach to historical study and analysis which links the past with the present and indicates the way of the future. I therefore take as my text the proposition advanced by Liddell Hart that *'the practical value of history is to throw the film of the past through the material projector of the present on to the screen of the future'*.

I divide my paper into four themes:

First, I briefly examine the intellectual supremacy of history inside the military profession in the pre-nuclear age. I suggest that so long as war could be fought according to conventional methods, then orthodox military history - which is essentially campaign history - remained of paramount importance in officer education.

Second, I assess some the reasons for the decline of history as an intellectual discipline inside the Western military after 1945. I argue that orthodox military history failed to have applicability for the first quarter of a century of the nuclear age and consequently lost much ground to the new field of strategic studies.

Third, I briefly spotlight the reasons why military history once again became intellectually important to many Western military professionals after the 1970s. To demonstrate the value of an historical approach to modern warfare, I highlight its use in the development of the operational level of war in recent Western military thought.

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A  
Approved for public release;  
Distribution Unlimited

Fourth, I examine the role of history in future officer development. I argue that it will have three main functions in the next century: first, to educate future leaders in operational art; second, to promote a balanced organisational understanding of warfare by producing historically-minded officers and third, I argue that knowledge of military history is essential in reinforcing the institutional values and unique ethos of the profession of arms.

### **Theme 1. The Relevance of Military History in the Pre-Nuclear Age**

In the first half of the twentieth century, *after the study of tactics, history was often regarded as the single most important subject in the preparation of a future military leader in Western armies*. For instance, in 1912, a final year officer at the famous German *Kriegsakademie*, spent 7 hours out of a 17 hour instruction week studying both military and general history. As Colonel G. F. R. Henderson, Professor of Military Art and History, at the British Staff College, Camberley put it in 1900: *'leadership is the greatest lesson of history'*. The nineteenth century had demonstrated how a single decisive battle - a Waterloo, a Koniggratz or a Sedan - could change the course of international affairs in a day. Intimate knowledge of the great encounter battle became the main educational model for military professionals and its careful reconstruction by what became known as the applicatory method of history was highly valued by armies.

According to the applicatory method, officers studied war leadership by examining particular examples of generalship and by testing the soundness of battlefield decision-making against actual events and outcomes. The focus was on the classical *art of war*, in which knowledge of the discrete sequence of battlefield/campaign events was as important as the analysis of their content. One learned Marathon for the flanking attack; Leuctra for the echelon attack; Cannae for the double envelopment and so on. Comparatively little attention was paid to placing warfare in a modern industrial or political context.

Despite the experience of the First World War, in the inter-war period, the orthodox model of narrative military history continued to be used in most Western armies to develop officers. With the possible exceptions of the German *Reichswehr* and the US Army, the increasing mechanisation and totality of industrial warfare was not reflected in the teaching of military history - a lack of modernity and adaptation - which was the subject of considerable criticism by inter-war military intellectuals such as J. F. C. Fuller and Liddell Hart.

But the supremacy of orthodox military history did not survive the Second World War. That conflict confirmed that modern war was as much about industrial resources, technology and political leadership as it was about battlefield skill. As the Korean War demonstrated, in the new age of the Cold War and atomic weapons there was no possibility of swift, decisive battle by conventional military methods. War could no longer be understood as a narrative of battlefield events disconnected from broader political, social and technological factors. Thus by the time the MacArthur generation had retired from service in the early 1950s, military history inside armies was rapidly losing its traditional intellectual preeminence. History was not to revive again as an intellectual force in Western armies for a quarter of a century. The reasons for this swift fall from grace are connected to the onset of the nuclear age.

### **Theme 2: Implications of the Nuclear Age for Military History**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the development of nuclear age strategic thought brutally exposed the intellectual limitations of orthodox/narrative military history. Campaign history seemed to lack application to a military profession facing a strategic and technological revolution. A prime focus on decisive battles in military education seemed obsolete in an era in which military power had to be employed within careful limits and against the shadow of mass destruction. To understand the new international security system, many Western armies adopted methods from the emerging field of civilian strategic studies which based its ideas on social science, mathematical and economic techniques.

Strategic studies did not accept that there was any usefulness in studying land warfare. Indeed its main premise was to try to prevent major war through a framework of deterrence and arms control. Bernard Brodie, perhaps the greatest of the nuclear age thinkers, summed up matters in 1946 when he said: *'Thus far the chief purposes of our [the United States] military establishment has been to win wars. From now*

*far the chief purposes of our [the United States] military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them!* Traditional military power, especially land warfare, was seen by many civilian defence intellectuals as impotent or even outmoded. This perception was reinforced by the fact that although conventional wars did occur during the Cold War they were mostly confined to the Third World and did not involve Western forces.

Between the early 1950s and the late 1970s, then, the intellectual activity of Western armed forces establishments was influenced by ideas on conflict that often grew out of civilian Cold War strategic thought - notably notions of limited war, escalation, flexible response and counter-revolutionary warfare. In a bipolar world of nuclear confrontation, conventional warfare seemed to be at best a tripwire to nuclear suicide. So, by the mid-1950s there was a rapid decline, and in some cases, almost an elimination of the historical approach to war in the curricula of Western armed forces.

Military thinking tended to be shaped by the reality of nuclear weapons and the grand strategy they spawned. Defence organisations became increasingly civilianised and deterrence was seen as more important than mastery of combat; an understanding of escalation seemed more relevant than operational skill. The practical experience of most Western armies became limited to field tactics and the politics of nuclear age defence bureaucracies. As the US Army Chief of Staff, General Maxwell D. Taylor observed sadly in 1955, the American Army officer now carried a field marshal's baton 'not in his knapsack but in his briefcase'.

### **Theme 3: The Revival of Military History in Western Armies**

How then given this unfavourable atmosphere did military history succeed in regaining any kind of influence inside Western armed forces during the second half the Cold War in the 1970s and 1980s? There are perhaps three interrelated reasons. First, between the 1950s and the 1970s, military history succeeded in slowly modernising itself as an intellectual subject capable of responding to modern military requirements. Second, contrary to received nuclear-age wisdom, advanced conventional warfare was not obsolete, and this became evident by the 1970s as the operational level of warfare began to emerge in Western military thought. Third, by the late 1980s, it became clear that nuclear age strategic thought was inadequate in providing an intellectual framework for planning at the new operational level of war.

#### ***Reason 1. The Modernisation of Military History***

In the 1960s and 1970s, reformist historians broadened military history away from campaign narrative into more of an analytical and problem-solving discipline. The focus moved towards the study of war itself in a broad and more interdisciplinary context. Two notable pioneers were the British historians, Michael Howard and John Keegan - both of whom modernised the approach to military history and made it a central component of war studies. Michael Howard at London University devised the now famous 'width-depth-context' formula for the use of military history in the armed forces: that is that officers should study military history in *width* (or comparatively), in *depth* (by wide reading of sources to deduce the real experience), and in *context* (treating it not autonomously but as a reflection of social forces). John Keegan at Sandhurst exposed many of the fallacies behind the stereotype of the 'tidy battlefield'. He showed how the writing of traditional campaign history had become so artificial and mechanical in narrative, so 'tidy', as to be almost useless in the education of modern officers. He helped transform the study of battle by focusing on the sociology and psychology of combat experience. The work of Howard and Keegan demonstrated how a broad approach to military history could have purpose and relevance in nuclear age military organisations.

#### ***Reason 2. The Return of Conventional War and the Emergence of the Concept of the Operational Level of War***

In the 1970s military professionals began to realise that while nuclear parity had decreased the possibility of a nuclear war it had paradoxically increased the probability of conventional operations. This perception was reinforced by the dramatic impact of precision weapons during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As military thinkers in the West began to contemplate the implications of precision warfighting, there was a gradual recognition that nuclear deterrence theory had limited applicability for

warfighting, there was a gradual recognition that nuclear deterrence theory had limited applicability for those charged with developing doctrine for a high tempo electronic battlefield.

Between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, many Western armies experienced a renewed confidence in the utility of land warfare - largely because of the development of the concept of the operational level of war - that area which seeks to relate tactical means to strategic ends. Fundamental to this concept was a corresponding revival in the study of military history, especially in the United States and British armies. This revival was based on developing a sophisticated understanding of *the conceptual basis of warfare* - rather than merely studying campaign detail. Both the US and the British armies began to emphasise historical study in analysing war at the operational level especially with regard to doctrine, command and leadership.

For instance, in the post-Vietnam United States Army, the doctrine of AirLand Battle which emerged in the 1980s was influenced by an appreciation of historic notions of manoeuvre warfare. Historical awareness and analysis played a significant role in the US Army's movement from the power warfare of the industrial age towards the precision warfare of the evolving information age. As General Donn A. Starry, Commanding General, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) from 1977-81 has argued, the modern purpose of history in the US Army was threefold: to inform judgments of the future; to provide a context for change by providing an informed vision, and to foster a common intellectual culture amongst Army leaders in times of uncertainty. The fruits of this approach were demonstrated by the performance of the US Army during the 1990-91 Gulf War.

### ***Reason 3. The Intellectual Crisis of Strategic Studies***

Just as the advent of the Cold War in the 1940s had found orthodox military history wanting, so the end of the Cold War found many of the ideas of strategic studies inadequate for the 1990s. With the collapse of its Cold War context, strategic studies - which had in many respects replaced military history in the 1950s - was plunged into a form of intellectual sclerosis from which it has yet to recover. Several Western military establishments began to focus more on the empiricism of history and less on the theory of social science to get a clearer perspective on contemporary security issues and to develop ideas about waging conventional warfare and developing doctrine.

### **Theme 4: The Role of Military History in Future Officer Development**

Against the background which I have sketched, then, what benefits can Western officers, especially Australian Army officers expect to derive from exposure to the study of and use of history in the future? There are probably three areas where history needs to be emphasised in leader development in the next century:

1. in education in operational art
2. in the conceptual development of officers by devising a contemporary approach to using the discipline
3. in reinforcing the traditional ethos of the profession of arms

### ***Future 1. Leadership and Operational Art***

Views differ on what kind of armies will emerge in the next century but military history will be crucial in the professional development of future leaders, simply because operational art - the art of winning campaigns - can only be understood by comparison with classical military strategy. Future officers will have to understand that operational art is not merely a form of 'bigger tactics'. They must grasp that operational art is the key to modern warfare because it relates tactical capabilities to strategic objectives. It represents theatre warfare in depth - that is the design and execution of a complex distributed campaign. As a former US Army TRADOC Commander, General William R. Richardson, has argued, operational art can only be mastered by *'thoroughly and systematically searching military history while simultaneously scanning the future for new technology and new concepts'*. Because of this, preparing leaders at the operational level of war will require an osmosis of art and science and an interplay of past and present. The art of war in the past must be studied but with a careful eye on the present state of science, technology and international affairs.

science, technology and international affairs.

Mastery of military history and theory - what Clausewitz once called the indispensable basis for an 'imaginative intellect' - will be required for operational specialists to gain the wide frame of reference necessary in planning and directing joint campaigns. But unlike traditional campaign study, operational art will have to be understood *from a top-down analysis* because an officer must understand the connection between military theory, military strategy and national policy. Leaders will need to know how to conceptualise and to sequence a series of encounters into a distributed manoeuvre campaign - which reconciles tactical events with strategic aims. In the future, a successful practitioner of operational art will have to master the theory of war on all three military levels so that he can visualise the centre of gravity and set the battle environment accordingly. In short, future commanders will have to understand the past in order to command the present and glimpse the shape of the future.

## ***Future 2. Conceptual Development through a Contemporary Approach to Military History***

In the next century, if history is to be of value in educating officers it must be used by armies as an intellectual discipline directly related to professional development. It must become part of the inter-disciplinary infrastructure of modern military establishments - and it must seek to demonstrate rather than assert its value to the military profession.

Because of the interplay between past, present and future in military education there is a natural and vitally important role for history to be used as an intellectual resource in officer education. But to fulfil this role properly, history needs to be developed according to an approach which has conceptual application to modern defence problems - that is according to a *contemporary approach*. The central assumptions this approach to military history mean using the discipline to meet the modern needs of professional officers by employing knowledge of the past to deepen an understanding of the present. A contemporary approach to history seeks to bring clarity and perspective to complex modern questions. It welcomes an inter-disciplinary environment, since it views history as being essentially an *interpretative rather than a narrative discipline*.

What are the practical benefits of such an approach? They are principally twofold -

1. *to inculcate a method of historical-mindedness in military thought*
2. *to use historical knowledge to temper a materialist philosophy of warfare.*

Taking the first: inculcating a culture of historical-mindedness when dealing with present problems is a very important concept in leader development. Historical-mindedness helps to refine a logical thought structure for purposeful decisionmaking. In a contemporary approach to history, the discipline should be employed as a conceptual base for studying situations and accustoming officers to think critically and deeply for themselves. The aim of military history in a service environment should be to probe the viscera of living war; to assist officers to become broad strategic thinkers - who like Liddell Hart are able to *see the present in the past and the future in the present*. This critical ability to 'think across time' is the essence of a contemporary approach to history which armies need to cultivate in the coming century.

Second, knowledge of history helps temper the tendency in armies to view war through the narrow materialist lens of science and high-technology. Overemphasis of a materialist approach to warfare is dangerous because it tends to encourage the development of *technicism* - that is the fostering of a military culture based on functional expertise in which war is seldom viewed as a holistic or social phenomenon. Military learning must, as General Omar Bradley once observed, be a finely balanced whole and include not only the mathematical approach of the scientist but the probing search of the historian.

The materialist school of military thought, with its emphasis on the *tangible* elements of technical skill, needs to be tempered by employing an historical approach which weighs the impact of the *intangible* elements in combat. For while science is essential to war, because of human fallibility, war itself remains an art - it is like a deadly tune played on a dark guitar. Combat is never simply the

remains an art - it is like a deadly tune played on a dark guitar. Combat is never simply the administration of firepower against an array of static targets. It is first and foremost a human encounter between, as General George S. Patton once put it, 'two magnificent bastards with warrior souls'. Its outcome is determined by those intangible factors of leadership, intellect, morale, organisational quality and unit cohesion which only historical inquiry illuminates.

By developing a *contemporary approach* to military history with *conceptual application* to present-day defence problems, officers learn that *historical* knowledge complements *materialist* knowledge and that both modes of thought are necessary in their intellectual preparation as military leaders.

### ***Future 3. Reinforcing the Ethos of the Profession of Arms***

Military leadership can only emerge if it has an intellectual foundation which extols a sense of special calling. Military history provides this intellectual foundation; it reinforces the ethos of the profession of arms as a noble endeavour pursued in the interests of the preservation of civilisation. As Vice-Admiral James Bond Stockdale, winner of the Medal of Honour in Vietnam has written: '*in my view the single most important foundation for any [military] leader is a solid academic background in history*'. From the history of arms, an officer learns martial values, how greatness of mind and the sweep of endeavour combine in the grandeur of leadership. He learns that the proper subject of war - is man and his nature - and that this nature remains unchanged from the Hittite charioteers at Kadesh to Western tank crews in the Gulf War.

But there is a dilemma for armies in pursuing such martial values in a Western democracy because they are at odds with liberal values. Yet to be an effective servant of democratic life, the military profession cannot become a mirror image of a free society; it must instead consciously and deliberately become the guardian of freedom. If there is to be a reflection of society it must always be through the lens of a shield. In a real sense, if there is to be the democratic splendour of an Athens there must also be the stern regimentation of a Sparta - for while the civilian community exists to promote a free quality of life - the military community exists to fight for and, if necessary, to die in defence of that free quality of life. As General Sir John Hackett has put it, military life is based on the ordered application of force under an unlimited liability and this sets the soldier apart from the community. *He will always be a citizen but so long as he serves he will never be a civilian.*

Military leadership will therefore not flourish if it loses its sense of historic mission based on a set of unique institutional values. This sense of history can be endangered by the occupational model of civilian society especially in free-enterprise social democracies. Consumerism not militarism is the greatest threat to the health of post-industrial democracy. Democratic politicians must be constantly reminded that the military is not a social welfare agency, a human rights organisation, a laboratory for social engineering or a conduit for defence economics. It has an historic mission to guard society by the sanction of force. The military can only absorb those societal changes which will not reduce its prime mission - namely the ability to fight. If a military organisation becomes imbued with civilian rather than combat ideals or with a managerial rather than a martial set of values, it risks signalling to its political masters that it has forfeited the mantle history has conferred. As the US Army discovered in Vietnam, one must beware the rise of a technically competent but historically illiterate officer corps prone to equate technology with tactics, efficiency with effectiveness and management with leadership.

Future officers will of course need both the skills of excellent leadership and of efficient management. But we need to clearly understand the difference between them. As a former US Army Chief of Staff, General Edward C. Meyer, has put it: managers are not asked to die in the name of corporate cost-effectiveness. Military leadership is the historic instrument of warrior action; managerialism is the functional instrument of civilian business enterprise. They may intersect; but the twain do not meet. We must heed the wise words of Admiral Stockdale '*the soldier cannot adopt the methodology of business without adopting its language, its style, its tactics, and ultimately its ethics. Efficiency replaces honour as the greatest good*'.

As we approach the next century, some Western intellectuals have argued that we have entered a 'post-heroic age' in which there will be no more pedestals in Valhalla and no more victory marches

through Persepolis. Military service will be shaped not by a warfighting mentality or by great causes but by impersonal economic globalism, by the unromantic constabulary role and by the minimum use of force. If this is so, then the military will need more than ever before the binding force of service tradition, professional identification and honour - in short the way of the soldier - and this is a way we can learn from only one source - the history of arms.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, the values of the MacArthur generation - Duty, Honour, Country - are for all ages and for all time because they reflect the way of the Western professional soldier. They will remain the basis of future military success and they will motivate Generation X officers in the next century as they did the Beat and Jazz Generations before them. But they are institutional values which must be underpinned by the history of warfare as the corporate knowledge of the profession of arms. MacArthur himself recognised this when as US Army Chief of Staff in 1935 he wrote:

More than most professions the military is forced to depend on intelligent interpretation of the past for signposts charting the future. Devoid of opportunity, in peace, for self instruction through actual practice of his profession, the soldier makes maximum use of the historical record in assuring the readiness of himself and his command to function efficiently in an emergency. The facts derived from historical analysis he applies to conditions of the present and proximate future, thus developing a synthesis of appropriate method, organisation and doctrine.

It is important then, for military officers to gain historical knowledge as they rise in their profession, because as Henry Kissinger has noted, it is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience. The convictions which senior officers have formed before reaching the pinnacle of their careers tend to be the intellectual capital they will consume for as long as they continue in office. The military mind must therefore be tempered by systematic training in the latest technology; be broadened by progressive education in history, politics and philosophy; and deepened by increasing experience both real and vicarious. It must be a mind which rigorously and continuously pursues mastery of the art and science of war. In the next century, we must endeavour to produce military leaders who, like the great Prussian officer, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, possess both the courtier's eye and the scholar's tongue, but who never forget that these skills are learned in order to allow them to fulfil the prime and unique mission which history has endowed - the wielding of the sword.

---

[Miscellaneous Papers](#) | [LWSC Home Page](#) | [Copyright Notice](#)

*Last revised 29 July 1997*

New Text Document.txt

29 January 1998

This paper was downloaded from the Internet.

Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release;  
distribution is unlimited.

POC: Department of the Army

Date: 1997